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Abstract:

Purpose

The purpose of this paper, from a work based learning practitioner perspective, is to present an insight into some of the challenges, benefits and impacts associated with workforce development and employer responsive provision (ERP). The focus is learning, which is designed to meet an organization's needs and intended for groups of learners to develop their skills, whilst bringing tangible benefits to their organization.

Design/methodology/approach

Focusing upon experiences of managing an employer engagement, action research project, which worked with over 40, small and medium sized enterprises and more recently working with three major corporate organisations, this paper provides a personal perspective of engaging with organizations. It draws upon primary data from personal experiences and action research of working with employers and learners, and secondary data, such as the Higher Education Impact Study (2008) and the Higher Education Regional Development Agency's Skills for Growth report (2009). After setting the context, this paper will consider ERP and its challenges, in terms of organizational needs meeting academic tradition. This is supported with case study anecdotes, before a consideration of the impacts and benefits of ERP from an organizational perspective.

## Findings

This paper provides insights into effective ERP and the elements needed to support its success. With probable continued growth in ERP, it is imperative that HEIs with ERP strategies understand the associated challenges and benefits. It suggests that in order to promote sustainable ERP activity, HEIs will need to consider a more strategic approach concerning the staff engaging in ERP activities.

## Practical implications

From a work based learning practitioner perspective, this paper presents an insight into some of the challenges, benefits and impacts associated with workforce development and employer responsive provision (ERP).

## Originality/value

This paper draws together current thinking on ERP with practice based application and understanding in order to inform and develop practice. It offers practical insights and experiences which build upon various bodies of literature to present identified elements necessary for successful engagement with employers. As the literature around ERP at present is fairly small, this paper offers a valuable insight into successful practice, building usable models for people working in this field.

## Keywords:

Learning organizations, Workplace learning, Employees development, Employer responsive provision, Work based learning, Workforce development, Partnerships, Employer led learning

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## Article

## Introduction

From a work based learning (WBL) practitioner perspective, this paper presents an insight into some of the challenges, benefits and impacts associated with workforce development and employer responsive provision (ERP). The focus is learning, which is designed to meet an organizations needs and intended for groups of learners to develop their skills, whilst bringing tangible benefits to their organization.

Focusing upon experiences of managing an employer engagement, action research project, which worked with over 40, small and medium sized enterprises and more recently working with three major corporate organizations, this paper provides a personal perspective of engaging with organizations. It draws upon primary data from personal experiences and action research of working with employers and learners, and secondary data, such as Nixon's (2008) Work Based Learning Impact Study and the Higher Education Regional Development Agency's (HERDA) Skills for Growth report (2009). After setting the context, this paper will consider ERP and its challenges, in terms of organizational needs meeting academic tradition. This is supported with case study anecdotes, before a consideration of the impacts and benefits of ERP from an organizational perspective.

## The context

In the UK over the past several years, government White papers (such as Leitch, 2006, The Leitch Review; the Macleod report, 2009; and the HERDA, 2009, National Skills Strategy), have presented challenging targets and highly ambitious proposals for both higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers. Post Leitch, higher education's (HE) role was identified as up-skilling the workforce in order to attain economic prosperity and increase social justice through increased productivity and improved employment. Leitch presented us with questionable statistics and policy recommendations, perhaps even a governmental neo-colonialist approach to HE skills development with no clear understanding of what higher levels skills were (White, 2008). But as Wedgwood (2007) speculated, HE could make a unique contribution to workforce development, meeting the needs of employers for both high-level generic skills and high-level knowledge-based skills and competences in order to create a thinking, educated workforce "working intelligently. As Eastwood (2007) acknowledged, HE took on that challenge by engaging with employers, but in the midst of an economic downturn, the drivers for engagement and the issues of workforce development became increasingly more important; for employers to increase staff performance and productivity, for employees to develop existing and new higher level skills and for HEIs to develop existing and new relationships with businesses.

In a changing world, with emerging economies integrating into global markets (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2009) there is a need for a UK based workforce that knows how to operate in a globalized market place, to think critically and make informed decisions in a highly complex environment; in effect a new skills base is required in a post recession economy. Bolden et al. (2009) point out that historically universities have taken a small share of the workforce development market leaving it to further education colleges and private training providers.

However, HEIs have recognized this pressing need for developing the workforce and are working more and more with employers to improve workplace performance and productivity through a customized WBL approach to meet employers needs, in what is often now termed as ERP.

## ERP

In this case WBL is as Garnett (2004) defines a learning process which focuses University level critical thinking upon work, in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities, to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the university (in Garnett et al., 2009, p. 4). But, ERP presents a shift away from the learner-centred approach and the traditional relationship between HEIs and work-based learners, whereby learners have been autonomous in planning and executing their own self-designed learning to one where the employer drives the learning design, mapped to the needs of the organization. Yet, one must not lose sight that the learner is at the heart of the process and as such consideration to their needs must be given. It is the learner/employee who is fundamental to the process and as Mishra (2008) posits learning is not a common process and you cannot force people to learn – “you have to make them want to learn, and that is a challenge for HEIs and organizations. On a cautionary note, White (2008) points out that HEIs must ensure that they are engaging in purposeful activity in order for learners and employers to have positive and meaningful learning experiences and not simply aspiring to achieve targets as set out by Leitch.

Some HEIs are exploring the challenges identified by Leitch (2006) in order to understand and manage the high levels of risk associated with growing employer engagement. This involves exploring new ways to remove the barriers and create enablers and the environment in which innovation in provision can thrive (Eastwood, 2007) and be sustained. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education (2010) identify a range of risks associated with ERP and the ways in which such risk can be minimized, the key factors being the relationship between the partners and their understanding of maintaining quality and standards. Increasingly we are seeing a drive for more of an equal partnership, which clearly identifies the role which employers have to play, not just in terms of financial support but a holistic investment into HE and WBL. The governmental drive on workforce development and skills and economic growth has seen funding put in place for employer co-funded provision and additional student numbers, this being the only funded growth available to HEIs (HEFCE, 2007). But the problematic nature of ERP with its diversity, complexities and its unique nature, challenges all notions of a clear framework in terms of roles and provision. What is fundamental to ERP success is the development of relationships between HEIs and employers, followed by their sustained interaction with employers viewed as stakeholders, consumers or strategic partners (Hughes, 2004).

Higher ambitions – “the future of universities in a knowledge economy (BIS, 2009) argues for a framework to widen access, sustain and improve standards in university excellence, to deliver wider participation and fairer access in order to create, acquire and transform knowledge into

commercially successful uses. Therefore, HEIs are encouraged to help businesses in order to guide and aid organizational developments in this area. Furthermore, as Mumford (2007) suggests, employers actively need to embed a workplace learning culture for the future, one which adds value to businesses. Development of bespoke learning programmes, alongside accreditation of in house training and recognizing experiential learning can benefit both employees and employers and drive new workforce development initiatives, increasing both organizational and individual performance and productivity. Leitch (2006) called for the rebalancing of HEIs priorities to make available flexible and responsive provision, without acknowledging or offering help and encouragement to address the problematic nature of HEI systems, procedures and policies or addressing the financial issues. Mumford (2007) recognized that universities must seek to provide quality, simplicity and efficiency, which for many would mean moving towards a change of internal systems, procedures and ideologies, which are in place. One could argue that quality, simplicity and efficiency should be easily achievable, however as with many large organizations, HEIs are founded upon bureaucratic systems. Increasingly though, new developments in HEIs are taking place in order to facilitate ERP and it is only as growth occurs and develops, will we begin to see major changes. Yet, noting Solomon and Usher's (1999) interesting metaphor for HE as the house of knowledge, and the need for it to undergo reconstruction, renovation and reconfiguration to present a modern, open plan infrastructure which will enable HE to work with WBL, and not against it (in Boud and Solomon, 2003, p. 226), one can observe that change is slow.

#### Organizational needs meets academic tradition

More and more employers are engaging with HE as WBL plays a more prominent part in university offerings. Employers understand the concept and can see the benefits of developing their employees through bespoke packages of WBL. This presents a move away from training and NVQ's, which often relied upon narrow, behaviouristic skills acquisition (Beckett and Hager, 2002) to a model of professional education with scope for discovery. According to Biggs (2003) effective professionals need functioning knowledge; a combination of declarative knowledge (the relevant theoretical knowledge base), procedural knowledge (the skills necessary to apply this) and conditional knowledge (an awareness of appropriate circumstances in which to apply the declarative and procedural knowledge). This is supported by Gibbons et al.'s (1994) concept of Mode 2 knowledge whereby knowledge is produced outside of the university in the context in which it will be used and as such knowledge is problem based and inter disciplinary. Consequently, this identifies the need for new academic skills to support ERP as it calls for an approach quite different to that of the traditional academic and the provision of Gibbons et al.'s (1994) definition of Mode 1 knowledge, being the more traditional discipline based.

HE WBL provides opportunities for this, balancing academic knowledge and skills with professional competency and/or capability, meeting both the needs of the organization and those of the individuals for mutual benefit. WBL enables the characteristics of HE; i.e. reflection, analysis, problems solving, creativity and evaluation to be balanced with the higher level skills which employers are seeking; i.e. communication, teamwork, problem solving and decision making, all within its own practice based context. Potentially ERP does have implications for employers who

may not be ready for the challenges associated with developing their employees to think critically. HE will equip employees with the skills to generate knowledge from practice and enable change and this may lead to tensions in the workplace. Thus, employers need to be alert to this prior to engaging with HE.

On the other hand ERP may pose difficulties for HEIs in terms of the employer's application and selection process of employees being enrolled onto programmes, see Case study 1. Experience points to two potential scenarios, one being that learners are not at the right level to engage in a HE programme and second, learners being put onto a course of which they have no interest. Both of these have serious negative implications for the HEI and the learner or their colleagues engaging on the programme. Therefore it is important for the HEI and the employer to ensure three things take place:

(1)

The programme is developed at the correct level and is fit for purpose.

(2)

The application and selection process and criteria are developed in partnership with the HEI and the employer.

(3)

There is a strong communications strategy ideally supported with informative events such as a pre induction workshops or a road show.

Additionally, a major factor is to ensure that any type of HE development is supported internally from a senior management perspective.

#### Case study 1

A pharmaceutical company identified a need for its leading scientists to have management development. Although fully qualified and with doctoral qualifications, these people were leading teams and had no management experiences which was causing some in house difficulties. Working

with the human resource director (HRD), a 30-credit certificate of achievement in managing people was developed at post-graduate level. On induction it became apparent that the learners had been given a directive to attend, they believed that as scientists they needed no further development and that the learning was something, which was being done to them. Two weeks after the programme commenced the HRD left the company and the programme was withdrawn as it was not supported by other members of the senior management team or the learners.

This programme had been designed, developed and implemented without full support of the senior management team or the employees identified for the management development programme. The implications of this were the time and resources put into the development, but as this was part of a funded project for the company, the loss lay largely with the HEI. Although this presents a unique example in that a funded opportunity was misused, it indicates the depth of collaboration and mutual understanding needed.

Burns and Costley (2003) put forward the notion that work based learners are competent, have a variety of skills, and are effective in their own context. They have intellectual capital and are not seeking so much factual knowledge from HEIs, but how to research and develop knowledge, reflect and evaluate situations and to think autonomously. Walsh (2008) points out, when engaging with work-based learners, academic staff can be seen to be involved in andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles et al., 2005) rather than paedagogy which is more focused on teaching and learning. ERP models vary and utilize elements such as facilitation, delivery, distance and blended learning approaches. It is the uniqueness, complexity and diversity of what the different models of ERP can be, where one can begin to question the suitability of paedagogy to this form of WBL and it may be that the spirit of WBL would be better suited to the notion of andragogy, or more so, to develop a new hybrid model, which incorporates elements of both the content approach of paedagogy with the process approach of andragogy. Boud and Solomon (2003) importantly recognized the demands and developments for a new paedagogy, incorporating academia and workplace practice, but developments in this area appear to be limited.

As WBL grows and develops across HEIs, the whole notion of WBL and how work-based learners learn presents a key challenge to non WBL academics, with as Laycock (1993), suggests, a paedagogical shift needed from:

didactic to facilitative teaching;

dependent to autonomous study;

transmission to interpretation; and

authoritarian to democratic.

Against this background, future workforce development and employer engagement activities will require academic staff with a different set of skills, knowledge and understanding as demonstrated

in Table I (Eyres et al., 2008). As Tallantyre (2008) notes, good education is transformative and a move away from training to one of learning can lead to divergent thinking as opposed to convergent thinking, challenging learners to be critical and seek change rather than passive learning and accepting and absorbing given knowledge. That is not to say that this cannot be problematic and some employers, whilst seeking higher level thinking or qualifications for their employees, demand a level of prescription and therefore may sabotage the notion of enabling creativity, as demonstrated in "Case study 2".

## Case study 2

Case study 2 is about major banking organization working with an HEI to develop a university award of 60 credits. The banking industry is heavily regulated and the organization is seeking to develop their employees in line with regulations and give the employees the skills and knowledge to undertake their job, in effect to give them a licence to practice. The programme consists of 30 credits of in-house training leading onto a work-based project of 30 credits. There is a transient team working with the HEI on the development of this award with every detail being signed off by a senior management steering group.

The in-house training consists of a well-developed solutions framework underpinned with the organizations preferred operational models and theories. This is supported by a team of development managers who observe solutions being implemented and pass employees through a traffic light system. For HE purposes, this is balanced with a series of reflective learning statements and a post-implementation reflective review. However, all of the training and the reflective work has been developed by the organization through the use of templates and a series of prompting questions. The organization views this as simplifying the process for its employees, but this standardized approach does not enable people to think for themselves and has the added effect of stifling creativity and perhaps critical thinking. The organization does not principally seek to equip employees with higher level critical thinking skills and this impacts on how they believe the programme should be developed.

Moving onto the work-based project the organization wanted to provide a framework to ensure that its employees undertake a project, which will have commercial impact. This resulted in the development of a bespoke curriculum supported by the organization's provision of a fully structured workbook template. This template was designed to guide the learners through each phase of assessment as required by the organization and within academic standards. However, the project had been specifically designed to improve both employee performance and productivity, but was restrained in what it could realize through this type of approach. A change in personnel in the team, to a person leading on the curriculum side of the project who understood the implications of being too prescriptive has allowed the academic developer to bring in a degree of flexibility and creativity. This resulted in the workbook becoming a data store and notebook to aid in putting together other elements of the assessment; a business plan and a reflective report.



In working with organizations, there can be a tension with employer driven content whereby learning, teaching and assessment is set with little or no scope for creativity and this could be seen as a challenge to the fundamentals of HE. This indicates a greater need for a common understanding of what HE has to offer and how organizational 'needs' can be serviced.

In developing high-level knowledge and skills, Bradley (2008) identified a third component to HE, that of capability. Recently, developing capability through higher level learning is seen to be a key factor in developing capable workplace learning (Cairns and Stephenson, 2010). Stephenson (1994) defined capability as:

an integration of knowledge, skills and personal qualities used effectively and appropriately in response to varied, familiar and unfamiliar circumstances (in Cairns and Stephenson, 2010).

Another factor we know is that work-related learning has been concerned with performance competences and it is suggested that the higher level thinking of WBL develops capability and can enable workplace change, thus impacting on performance and productivity, as Stephenson (1993) notes, in terms of the ability to:

take appropriate and effective action;

communicate effectively;

collaborate with others; and

learn from experiences.

Furthermore, with the combination of higher level knowledge, skills and capabilities one would suggest that we are enabling the development of a more informed workforce, which meets government and HE aspirations and which contributes and impacts successfully to society and the economy.

Supporting ERP

Section:ChooseTop of pageIntroductionThe contextERPOrganizational needs meet...Case study  
1Case study 2Supporting ERP <<Case study 3Case study 4Impacts and benefits of  
H...ConclusionsReferencesCorresponding author

Not only is the concept of ERP complex, but also the wider range of related activities needed to build and develop sustainable relationships. Employer understanding of what HE can offer, clarity in roles and expectations for all parties and partnership working are some of the issues which often have to be addressed (White, 2008). Ambrose and Ni Luanaigh (2009) propose one of the challenges which HE faces is that:

Working with non-educational partners, in particular, involves a major investment of time to ensure that such organisations fully understand the importance of maintaining a high quality and consistent HE learner experience.

Personal experience suggests that the greatest challenges, which often arise are the lack of understanding of the partners and their organizations. That is, by the employer of HE, systems, processes and procedures and conversely by the HEI and its lack of understanding of how the organization works and its employee profile. Some of these challenges are illustrated further in 'Case study 3'.

### Case study 3

Section:ChooseTop of pageIntroductionThe contextERPOrganizational needs meet...Case study  
1Case study 2Supporting ERPCase study 3 <<Case study 4Impacts and benefits of  
H...ConclusionsReferencesCorresponding author

Case study 3 is about a large corporate organization (over 100,000 employees) who wanted to develop their managers through an in-house academy approach, drawing upon external expertise. In the first instance an external training provider had been recruited to develop a management training programme and as the vision for the academy developed the organization recognized a need for getting their employees accredited. They contacted an HEI to explore opportunities and the decision was taken to begin their first line management development with a HE Certificate in Management Practice, through a WBL approach. This meant that a wrap around curriculum and assessment was needed which met the employer's needs but which also worked with the external providers training. The time frame from the early stages of employer engagement through to the development, operationalizing and implementation of the programme was only three to four months and therefore the development team was faced with constant challenges:

HE was a completely new concept for the organization and their development team constantly needed to understand the HEI regulations, systems, procedures and policies and the reasoning behind them in all areas of the development, operationalizing and implementation of the programme. As these were new concepts and ways of working this could be confusing at times for them, particularly given the short timeframe.

Similarly, it became apparent that the organization knew the profile of the types of employees who would engage in the programme and how best to engage them. This was a workforce with historical characteristics and as such the HEI had to meet on the organizations terms. However, as the programme developed it was acknowledged by the company that a cultural shift was needed in their approach.

The curriculum development is a demonstration of how both partners had worked together to ensure it met with the HEI QA standards but also in meeting the requirements of the organization. The process of undertaking the curriculum development in the short timeframe was the most challenging part.

The organization had specific requirements and the HEI had to try and accommodate these in a responsive way. This was helped by internal teams of people who were engaged in the journey and with the organization and therefore understood the requirements and made them happen wherever possible.

On working with the HEI the organization realized that the external training providers' materials did not necessarily meet HE requirements and this had to be repositioned in terms of taster materials. The consequences of this were that the development team had to do much more work in terms of providing a supportive infrastructure for the learners.

Many of the challenges which were faced in 'Case study 3' are much the same as with any organization, however, what was key here was the timeframe in which the team had to develop the programme. ERP is often about just in time solutions and this must be considered for future developments, flexibility of programme development is a challenge, which needs supporting from a QA perspective.

Drawing upon the experiences of the case studies, Figure 1 suggests the key elements, which are required to be in place as a basis for effective ERP. There is a necessity as demand for ERP grows for there to be a common understanding between HEIs, employers and learners and an agreed set of 'rules of engagement' or partner responsibilities in order for effective engagement to take

place (Brennan and Little, 2006). Moreover, a greater sense of partnership is required between academics and employers in the design, embedding and facilitation of programmes. An important element of this would be the employers understanding of Stewart's (1977) concept of structural capital, that is the organizing and structuring capability of the organization as expressed in formal instruments, policies, regulations, procedures, codes, functional business units, task groups, committees or less formal culture, networks and practices. In particular, the structural capital of HEIs to support WBL programmes (in Garnett et al., 2008). This relates to the recent QAA for Higher Education (2010) report which discussed risks to academic culture, when partners do not understand the implications of academic quality and standards. But experiences also show a need for the HEI to have an understanding of the organizations structural capital as this can impact upon how the programme is designed and delivered. Core to ERP activity is the tripartite relationship of the HEI, organization and the learner, working together in partnership, with a unified understanding of what is trying to be achieved and the rules of how that will take place, commonly understood. It is further suggested that by both organizations having an understanding of the others structural capital, this strengthens not only the relationship but also adds value to the programme development and implementation and eliminates risks.

Employer engagement is not a new concept and the Emskills (2004) project maintained that the key to successful employer engagement is relationships and the best employer engagement takes place where there are effective and mutually beneficial relationships between employer and provider, nurtured and built up over a period of time. Furthermore, that these relationships are built upon trust, respect and the shared drive to develop learning programmes that benefit all of the stakeholders. The notion of "relationships" and developing strong and committed relationships between all partners is a key factor to the success of ERP and has been cited by many over the years (QAA for Higher Education, 2010, p. 10). Additionally, it is useful to consider ERP as a journey, Cooper and Mackinnon (2008) refer to different processes in this journey which have four distinct phases preparing for engagement, establishing engagement, maintaining engagement and developing engagement. However, a different model is to consider three stages; the employer engagement, programme design and delivery and programme implementation and facilitation. This can help academics and support staff working in this area to develop long-term employer engagement strategies and processes.

In order to provide a responsive provision to businesses, HEIs have to consider employer needs and requirements and help facilitate their engagement into HE and present key lessons from past experiences for organizations to consider. In many cases due to the "just in time" circumstances in which ERP occurs, for example to meet a business need or a staff developmental need, and the time frames and levels at which people are operating within, provision can often be seen to be developmental and a work in progress towards an ideal organizational workforce development strategy. Figure 2 demonstrates a holistic overview of the key elements needed for successful ERP. In terms of the organization, successful ERP relies upon, at the very least, organizational support in:

defining and focusing engagement;

developing, sustaining and leading the partnership; and  
supporting engagement (Bolden et al., 2009).

An advanced model would be linking into or developing a workforce development strategy. Whereby curriculum is developed in line with the organizational ethos, vision, strategy and performance aims and objectives and is supported from top down management and engages employees on an organizational development journey, as in "Case study 4".

#### Case study 4

Section: Choose Top of page | Introduction | The context | ERP | Organizational needs meet... | Case study 1 | Case study 2 | Supporting ERP | Case study 3 | Case study 4 << | Impacts and benefits of H... | Conclusions | References | Corresponding author

A mines rescue company who had diversified into health and safety training after privatization were seeking Investors in People (IIP) as part of its strategic plan. The company were a medium-sized organization who had six stations throughout the UK, three of the stations had achieved IIP and three had been unsuccessful and the company were seeking a solution, which was supported strongly by senior management.

Having engaged with an HEI, the commercial manager and the academic link worked together to analyse the IIP reports of the unsuccessful stations and then undertook an employee survey to establish their thoughts on the problems and their perceived solutions, also attaining their support in developing the company moving forwards. The major problems identified were communication issues, both at a macro and a micro level. This included head office communicating to stations, stations communicating with each other and managers and staff communicating independently. A 30-credit certificate of achievement consisting of two modules was developed (HE Level 4) in Organizational Behaviour (OB) and Communications.

The first module was an individual module in OB, designed for the learner to undertake an investigation into an area which they felt needed understanding and developing and which would help in the communications module. The second module was a group project based on teamwork, communication and decision making within the context of improving communications. Consisting of three parts, the assessment was a presentation to senior management with formative feedback, a group report and a reflective piece.

Overall the programme was successful and did enable the company to achieve IIP at their remaining stations; furthermore, the company went on to win regional and national Learning Through Work awards for developing their staff and the impact this had on their business. Whilst, the company did not fully understand the HE structural capital at the start, there were key elements that made the

programme a success and enabled them to achieve the desired outcome and which supports the notion of Figures 1 and 2.

They had an identified need, which was supported by an organizational strategy.

Senior Management fully supported the programme and were involved in design and assessment and the learning.

Employee understanding and support of the company ethos, vision and strategy and the desire to be successful.

Employees were involved in the underpinning research and the developmental journey.

Strong partnership between the commercial manager and the academic and full support in place, which gave rise to a common understanding and rules of engagement.

The programme was developed at the correct level.

For this programme then, it was key that the organization had a vision and strong leadership to take the programme forwards in terms of developing solutions for a specific need.

Similarly, in order for HEIs to engage with organizations they must ensure that senior staff have a vision and lead on ERP developments and to disseminate this and enable ERP developments and innovations. Table I provides a summary of the institutional infrastructural factors and the required staff knowledge and skills base, but there is also a real need to ensure that academic staff working with employers not only have the appropriate knowledge and skills, but also the personal interest, drive and motivations. They will have to develop successful strategies, respond quickly to many different challenges and be a key ambassador for their work. Most importantly they must be passionate, enthusiastic and be able to work with and motivate others. Consequently, academics engaging in ERP are considered to have a toolbox of knowledge and skills and an ability to draw upon the necessary and appropriate resources. For HEIs to capitalize on such expertise and skills, a strategic approach is critical in building, developing and expanding best practice.

This may pose a challenge to the traditional academic and therefore staff development and dissemination of best practice will be key for HEIs in developing ERP. It may be the case that HEIs could have to consider employing specialist academics to undertake the ERP roles and help to develop the existing traditional academic job role moving forwards. The University of Derby Corporate (2008), for example, have developed a specialist academic role; the workforce development fellows are WBL practitioners who have ERP expertise, other HEIs with employer engagement experience have developed similar roles. Yet, in the current economic climate with cut backs imminent, but growth in thirdâ€stream activity a major driving factor, it is suggested that in order to promote sustainable ERP growth in a highly competitive market, HEIs must look to strategizing successful operational models.

Impacts and benefits of HE workforce development

Considering the organizational drivers for engagement with HE and the impact and benefits on organizational productivity and performance, it is important to explore the mutual benefits to both the individual learner and the organization in terms of perceived benefits and actual benefits. As noted previously the learner is at the heart of the process and it is their personal and professional development (HEA, 2008), which then impacts upon an organization. Livsey (2009) determines that:

impact refers to the benefits accrued by the learners engaged in work-based learning, both personally and professionally, and the difference such learning has had on organisations within which the learners worked.

Table II summarizes the key benefits of implementing HE workforce development and interestingly, the actual benefits to individuals far outweigh the perceived benefits. This presents a major challenge to both employers and to HEIs in the development of ERP and how to best represent the benefits of HE study to potential learners. Additionally, the benefits as presented may seem to be intangible and may not be largely understood at a microlevel, which is often what an employer is seeking and how engagement in HE programmes will impact on their bottom line. This implies that much more research on impact is needed in the future, both of a qualitative and quantitative nature, moreover looking at short-term and long-term impacts and whether these are meeting employer expectations.

## Conclusions

With probable continued growth in ERP, it is imperative that HEIs with ERP strategies understand the associated challenges and benefits. As holders of QA processes they must take responsibility for informing, shaping and developing strong employer partnerships built on rules of engagement and with common understanding, particularly with regards to the notion of structural capital. Included in this is the guidance and steer on organizational strategies such as the application and selection process.

Encouraging organizations to actively engage and support the running of programmes and to see the benefits of aligning programme developments to their strategy and engaging their employees in the developmental process will help to provide a stronger internal framework. Through HEIs developing their practices in ERP and understanding the wider picture, a key challenge will be to understand ERP from both an organizational and an employee/learner perspective and to position and market the concept and its associated benefits externally.

In order to promote sustainable ERP activity, HEIs will need to consider a more strategic approach concerning the staff engaging in ERP activities and whether to develop traditional academics or to develop a specialized academic role which acts as the interface into the knowledge of the traditional academic and with the workplace. Lastly, it will be key to recognize that although an academic link into ERP must be fully equipped with the necessary skills, organizations are unique and therefore ERP will continually be developing and changing and thus HEIs must be open to such changes.

Figure 1 Effective employer responsive provision

Figure 2 Nature of the support needed for successful ERP

Table I Overview of key components to support HEIs workforce development strategies

Table II Key benefits of implementing higher education workforce development

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Further Information

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